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Governance manoeuvred by a set of actors

Rajesh Dev

One may be intrigued about the incessant musings on Meghalaya in these columns for some time. But all will agree that impending elections always presage prophecies as well as estimations of the processes of governance. Our pristine association with this novel speciality called election studies inspires our continued assessment of the issues related to governance that apparently shape the foundations for electoral trends and outcomes. Hence our anxiety in these columns with states that go to polls soon — Meghalaya being only one of them.

Meghalaya is a thrilling illustration of “that government is best which governs not at all”. Over the past few years the state has been witness to political dramas where leaders of political coalitions were repeatedly changed. They were mutable not due to the conscious pressure of an enlightened citizenry but for reasons that were associated with more trite mercenary desires of people associated with a “trust” called government. The citizenry were mute audience to the drama, merely enduring the scenes with listless disgust and languid alienation.

Governance in the state is being manoeuvred by a set of actors that has plunder and loot as its prime objective. These actors in alliance with indigenous compradors have introduced feudalistic virtues in a “tribal” society. As such, community lands are being transformed into private fiefs of a few urban elite. This coalition determines the manner in which our social, political and economic life is coordinated and a commotion called governance interminably pursued. The ideology of this coalition is to mutate the core value of public-private partnerships whereby everything public is transformed into private assets.

The cost for the enactment of this drama is being defrayed by the citizens in the form of wholesale loot and plunder of public assets. They are being disbursed to settle political debts, and as patronage for political loyalty.

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Community lands being mortgaged to multinational corporations for producing cement; power projects being sanctioned to gutka makers; and incomplete infrastructures like hotels being distributed to coal traders — indeed, to almost anyone willing to bear the economic costs for political corruption. The list is too long and too well known to require repetition.

Well, at least the people of Meghalaya are not the only ones defraying such costs. In almost all the states of the region accountability and transparency are circumvented by appeals to underdevelopment and indigenuity. In almost all the states, people are financing political dramas being enacted by political formations and allowing political corruption to persist with impunity through this wholesale loot.

It is a Pan-North-east predicament, a “people” integrated by a common despair of a political class that consistently takes its electorate for a ride, year after year. It is this political class that finds it amazingly beneficial to keep societies of the region in a flux so as to derive increasing allocations for conflict reduction and flood control from a patronising centre.

This political corruption is admirably assisted by the fourth branch of government that finds its role well defined in a political scenario where there is no governance and there is nothing to execute. It continues to remain “a giant mechanism operated by pygmies”. An overwhelming majority of the bureaucracy reflects asinine dependency on the political class and civil-servant neutrality is only a misnomer. Dissidents amongst bureaucrats indicate how even the Chief of the Secretariat behaves more like a Chief of the Government rather than as that of the civil administration.

The manner in which even the most honest and professional bureaucrat is perceived as assisting the political class, being lead by a person who was honoured with a double doctorate of divinity, appears intriguing. Yet all fall in place when we take into account the forthcoming elections and the resources needed for trading the votes of an electorate. As some people have already said, a majority of them consider a five-hundred rupee note more worthy than the power of their votes to change the system.

Even as the politicians-bureaucrats family and their kin act like the real “ruling class”, the common citizen continues to carry the deadweight of rules and laws. Constitutional and legal obligations of the executive, managed by the politician-bureaucrat complex, have merely become political rhetoric. Politicians and bureaucrats, who perform their tasks with competence and astuteness, are silent exceptions.

It is indeed an ignominy to be a mere citizen in a system where only power protects since ordinary citizens are far removed from the kind of power that lubricates this system. We are only cyclically cajoled and coaxed to mandate a comparable group of “transactional leaders” because we are too diminutive and inert to be able to challenge this democratic deficit. Our inability to congregate as citizens with common collective interests effectively debilitates our ability to structure and determine the fate of our society.

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